

THE AUTOMOBILE: PROVIDING FREEDOM AND OPPORTUNITY

The automobile is the most practical and democratic transportation device in history. It enables millions of people to go to work, to the store, to the doctor's office, to the soccer field—to go where they want to go, when they want to go, and do what they need to do—within a reasonable amount of time. Learn how the automobile is a fundamental part of modern American culture in this section.

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Background

The automobile is a fundamental part of modern American culture. It is the most practical and democratic transportation device in history. The automobile enables millions of people to go to work, to the store, to the doctor's office, to the soccer field—to go where they want to go, when they want to go, and do what they need to do—within a reasonable amount of time.

Before the twentieth century, a few wealthy Americans had horses and carriages for urban travel and traveled mostly by train between cities. The vast majority of Americans rarely traveled more than 50 miles from home. Today, the average American travels 14,000 miles per year by automobile (cars and light trucks), according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (U.S. Department of Transportation 1998). Most non-auto travel is by air: an average of 1,700 miles per person per year.

Millions of Americans rely on the U.S. highway system to ship their products to other businesses, consumers, and markets here and abroad. Mobility on America's Interstate Highway system has been a key factor in the sustained economic growth and prosperity during the 1990's. Business establishments in the U.S. shipped more commercial freight and packages in 1997 than in 1993, valued at \$6.4 trillion. Changes in how and where goods are

produced and increases in international trade will contribute to the rise in freight tonnage over the next decade.

The automobile has opened the vistas of the United States. Most Americans can spend a weekend hiking in the mountains or swimming at the shore with only minimal travel time. Most people also use their cars when they travel longer distances on vacation.

The automobile has made it easier for Americans to live where they want to live and pursue their own lifestyles. Most Americans live only minutes away from medical care. People can live in one county and work in another. Mobility provides employers with a greater choice of workers and gives employees a greater choice of jobs. Farm families, once isolated from the rest of the world for most of the year, can now journey to town in minutes.

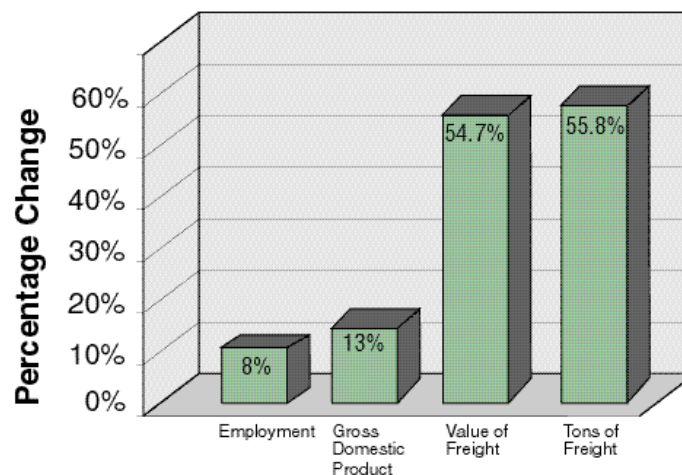
The Myth

America's high level of dependence upon the automobile has lowered the standard of living, snarled traffic, and lowered air quality.

The Facts

The mobility provided by our highways is critical to the modern American lifestyle.

Truck Shipments and Related Factors of Growth: 1993–97



Source: U.S. Department of Transportation

- Six out of every seven trips taken by Americans are in a car, truck, or motorcycle, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (U.S. Department of Transportation 1998). These trips are for a variety of purposes, with only 20 percent of trips for travel to work or on work-related business.
- Highway travel accounts for 90 percent of all passenger miles traveled in the United States. Air travel provides 9 percent and rail transit 1 percent, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics.
- Motorists pay considerably more each year in taxes and fees related to driving than the full cost of roads, according to a report by the American Petroleum Institute (1998). Highway taxes not spent on roads are diverted to mass transit and other non-highway expenses.
- Air quality has significantly improved, thanks in large part to reductions in overall highway vehicle emissions, while at the same time highway travel has increased.
- Transit's share of overall travel has not increased over the past decade largely because average travel times on transit are approximately double the travel time in private vehicles, says transportation analyst Alan Pisarski (1996). Studies also show that working women are especially dependent on their own cars to do family errands on the way to and from work.
- The automobile gives most Americans fast, easy access to medical care, fire and police protection, and other lifesaving, emergency assistance.
- The Federal Highway Administration (1999) makes it clear that only a small portion of additional travel occurs solely because of new capacity added to a previously congested road.
- The nation's road system remains the vital link in a national transportation system that allows Americans to travel outside their communities for tourism or to visit friends or

relatives. The American Travel Survey (1998) found that Americans took 82 percent of all trips to a destination at least 100 miles away for tourism or visiting in personal vehicles.

- Highways and the mobility they afford play a key role in the growing US economy and contribute a sizable portion to the Gross Domestic Product.

Our Position

The automobile has made it possible for people to enjoy a great deal of freedom in all aspects of their lives. The mobility provided by automobiles is critical to the modern American lifestyle.

Well-planned and maintained roads prevent many of the problems about which critics complain. Traffic congestion is not a result of people driving too much but is a result of a road network that has failed

to keep pace with the nation's growing transportation demands. By adopting a balanced approach to congestion, including building the necessary road capacity, improving the efficiency of existing roads, and making transit safer and more convenient, we can relieve congestion.

Faster, smooth-flowing traffic is also better for the environment, because it results in fewer emissions than stop-and-go traffic. Technology also is making great strides in reducing air pollution from automobiles. Tailpipe emissions have already decreased 95 percent since 1970, thanks to cleaner cars and cleaner fuels, a technological trend expected to continue in the future.

Endnotes

American Petroleum Institute. (1998). *The Benefits of Road Travel and Transport*. Washington, D.C.

Federal Highway Administration, *Highway Statistics 1997*, Washington, D.C.

Pisarski, Alan. (1996). *Commuting in America II*. Washington, D.C.: Eno Transportation Foundation.

U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics. (1998). *American Travel Survey*. Washington, D.C.

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